

Message Text

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R 081024Z AUG 75

FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 4205

INFO AMEMBASSY ANKARA

AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

AMEMBASSY JIDDA

AMEMBASSY MOSCOW

DIA WASHDC

USCINCEUR

C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 3033

BEIRUT PASS BAGHDAD

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: ECON, PFOR, SY, IZ

SUBJ: EUPHRATES WATER PROBLEM

REF: DAMASCUS 2979

1. INTENSIVE PRESS COVERAGE CONTINUES ON ALEPPO WATER CRISIS. EUPHRATES DAM MINISTER HAS CITED MANY TECHNICAL REASONS FOR PROBLEM. APPEARS SARG PRESENTLY SEEKING TO DOWNPLAY REGIONAL POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS. USSR AS DESIGNER SUPERVISOR OF DAM CONSTRUCTION MAY BE EMBARRASSED IF STRESS ON TECHNICAL PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH DAM FURTHER DEVELOPS.

2. PRESS CAMPAIGN ON ALEPPO WATER CRISIS CONTINUES UNABABED. ARTICLES ON SUBJECT DOMINATED THE TWO DAMASCUS DAILIES AUGUST 6-8. THRUST OF REPORTAGE IS THAT 1.5 MILLION SYRIANS FACE CALAMITY BECAUSE IRAQ IS NOW RECEIVING MORE THAN ITS SHARE OF EUPHRATES WATER. IN ADDITION, ARTICLES ASSERT THAT PRODUCTION OF STATE FACTORIES AND PRIVATE COMMERCIAL ENTERPRISES HAS BEEN DIRECTLY AFFECTED BY WATER SHORTAGE AND
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POPULATION OF ALEPPO IS NOW THREATENED BY DISEASE.

3. WEST GERMAN TV CREW IS NOW FILMING AT TABQAH DAM, ACCOMPANIED BY AP CORRESPONDENT FROM BEIRUT. ACCORDING TO LOCAL AP CORRESPONDENT, PRESS VISITS TO TABQAH HAVE BEEN FORBIDDEN DURING PAST SEVERAL MONTHS. (COMMENT: WE PRESUME REASON HAS BEEN BECAUSE OF SIZEABLE INCREASE IN MILITARY STRENGTH IN VICINITY TABQAH, INCLUDING ANTI-AIRCRAFT WEAPONS SITED ON TOP OF DAM ITSELF.) THIS NEW FREEDOM FOR FOREIGN PRESS COVERAGE WILL HOPEFULLY INTRODUCE MORE OBJECTIVE REPORTING ON PROBLEM WHICH UP TO NOW HAS BEEN CHARACTERIZED BY PROPAGANDA BROADSIDES FROM BOTH DAMASCUS AND BAGHDAD.

4. BEIRUT DAILY STAR OF AUGUST 6 QUOTES MINISTER OF EUPHRATES DAM, SUBHI KAHLE, AS SAYING SITUATION WILL BECOME MORE SERIOUS IN NEXT TWO OR THREE WEEKS AND "IF IT WERE UP TO ME I WOULD CLOSE THE DAM IMMEDIATELY." (DEPPRIMIN HAYDAR COMMENTED TO AMBASSADOR AUGUST 7 THAT IF FLOW TO IRAQ CONTINUES AT RATE OF PAST TWO MONTHS, ALEPPO WILL FACE CATASTROPHE IN ONE MONTH'S TIME.) STAR ALSO QUOTED KAHLE AS SAYING THAT (A) HE HAD WARNED PRESIDENT ASAD NOT TO INCREASE THE FLOW TO IRAQ IN JUNE BUT PRESIDENT DISREGARDED HIS ADVICE IN ORDER TO PACIFY SYRIA'S BAATHI NEIGHBOR; (B) HE EXPECTS THAT IF FLOW TO IRAQ IS REDUCED IT WOULD BE ONLY TO DEGREE NECESSARY TO SLAKE ALEPPO'S THIRST; (C) HEAVY SPRING RAINS INCREASED BUILDUP OF SEDIMENT IN OFFTAKE CANAL WHICH CANNOT BE CLEARED UNTIL ELECTRIC POWER IS AVAILABLE TO OPERATE A DREDGE. DREDGING CANNOT BEGIN UNTIL ELECTRIC TRANSMISSION LINE IS COMPLETED SOME SIX MONTHS HENCE; (D) TURKEY IS RESPONSIBLE FOR ALL THE TROUBLE SINCE IT IS NOT RELEASING SUFFICIENT WATER NEEDS FOR SYRIAN AND IRAQ; (E) PROBLEM FOR ALEPPOS IS ONLY TEMPORARY. SAME STAR ARTICLE QUOTES PRESIDENT ASAD AS SAYING "WE DO NOT DIFFERENTIATE BETWEEN OUR CITIZENS IN ALEPPO AND OUR CITIZENS IN IRAQ" WITH RESPECT TO WATER SUPPLY.

5. THERE IS STILL NO SIGN OF SERIOUS BILATERAL NEGOTIATIONS ON WATER DISTRIBUTION BETWEEN DAMASCUS AND BAGHDAD. THERE IS ONLY THE OCCASIONAL VISIT BY SAUDI MEDIATOR YAMANI TO BREAK UP THE MONOTONY OF "OBJECTIVE TECHNICAL CLARIFICATIONS" ISSUED TO PRESS STATEMENTS BY SYRIAN AND IRAQI CABINET MINISTERS.

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WE ARE NOT SUFFICIENTLY KNOWLEDGEABLE ABOUT TECHNICAL ASPECTS OF PROBLEM TO KNOW WHERE TRUTH LIES IN PARA 4 ASSERTIONS. MOST OF LOCAL COMMENTARY IS OBVIOUSLY SELF-SERVING AND SOME NON-SENSICAL (IE. INABILITY TO DREDGE WITHOUT HYDROELECTRIC POWER). HOWEVER, WE CONCLUDE THAT SYRIANS ARE TRYING TO BUILD INCONTROVERTIBLE TECHNICAL CASE FOR AGAIN CUTTING BACK ON FLOW TO IRAQ.

6. WE HAVE NO INFORMATION ON SOVIET REACTION TO PROBLEM.
IT SEEMS LIKELY, HOWEVER, THAT THEY WILL BE CONSIDERABLY
DISCOMFITED, PARTICULARLY SO IF THESIS FURTHER DEVELOPS
THAT PROBLEM IS SIGNIFICANTLY TECHNICAL IN ORIGIN.
ALREADY SOME QUESTIONING CAN BE HEARD IN DAMASCUS RE SOVIET
JUDGMENT IN SITING OF PIPES FOR ALEPPO TAKEOFF FROM LAKE
ASAD AND SOVIET UNDERESTIMATION OF SILTING RATE IN LAKE.
MURPHY

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